

Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics

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Foreword

The largest part of this book was originally written between 1993 and 1994. For a scholarly work, this is of course a long time ago. Almost twenty years are more than enough to make a book outdated with current research. This is why I had to thoroughly revise it and update it for its earlier editions: the Italian one in 1999 and the German one in 2006. When the moment came to prepare the present edition in English, I decided once again to update, revise and expand it. The result is now for me a strange mixture of old and new. If I had to start now writing on the topic of this book, I would probably do it in a very different way. But I believe that when I began working on this book, it was a pioneering enterprise and that its value – great or small it is not for me to decide – has remained intact even today. One of the reasons is that it was one of the first attempts to interpret Aleister Crowley not simply as an eccentric adventurer or even a malicious fraud, but as an intellectual and ideologist, who belonged to a particular cultural climate and had to be understood on the basis of the education he received, the ideas that influenced him, and the persons he frequented during his life. The particular angle that I chose for this research was politics, and I still believe it is one of the most interesting ones when applied to Crowley, but it could have been another as well, such as literature or art.

When I started writing my book, the most authoritative biography of Crowley was still the one by John Symonds, and scholarly literature on him was very scarce, if existing at all. Things have changed quite a bit since then, especially with the new wave of Crowley biographies that started in the late 1990s. And this is not to mention the myriad of smaller studies and articles, including scholarly ones, that have been published in the last ten years. It was impossible to integrate here all the information contained in these new publications, but I have done my best to use them and add references to them whenever they could bring something new or important to my study.

Another point of note is that in the past few years there has been a new appreciation of the importance of the scholarly study of Western esotericism in general, and of nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultism in particular. So it is today less necessary to justify one's research about someone like Aleister Crowley. My introduction still bears the traces of the wariness and the prudence one needed to show in doing research on this kind of subject, at least in Italy and especially as a burgeoning scholar, back in the early 1990s, when the first version of the book was written.

The reader will find acknowledgements related to the first edition of the book below, but I would like to thank here a few more persons who had an important role in the production of the present English edition. I would like to thank in particular the two publishers who were involved in this long (perhaps too long) process: Janet Joyce and

Tristan Palmer. They were both patient beyond what I thought was possible, and maybe even beyond what they thought was possible. I thank them heartily for having believed in this book, and also for having believed that this book would really be published one day, in spite of my repeated delays. I would also like to thank the translator, Ariel Godwin, and his father Joscelyn Godwin, for the work they have done and their efforts to make this English edition possible. I am happy to acknowledge also the excellent work done by Acumen editors Hamish Ironside and Gina Mance in copyediting the text before publication. I really appreciated their professionalism and the care they put into making this a better book.

Special thanks go to William Breeze and John L. Crow, for reading an early version of the translation and commenting on it. Without their suggestions this book would contain quite a few mistakes for which I would have been sorry. Apart from that, as most scholars doing serious research on Crowley and related subjects I also owe a big debt to William, who has allowed me to have access to documents from the OTO Archives that were essential for my research.

I would also like to thank Jerónimo Pizarro, Steffen Dix and Patricio Ferrari, who were particularly helpful when working again on the chapter on Crowley and Fernando Pessoa. H. Thomas Hakl has been kind enough to write an essay on Crowley and Julius Evola for the German edition of the book, and to make it available also for the present edition. It appears here as Appendix 1. A thank you also to my close colleagues at the University of Amsterdam, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Peter J. Forshaw and Egil Asprem, not so much for specific help in the preparation of the book, but for offering such a stimulating intellectual environment that I found, as usual, most convenient and productive, when pondering about the most intricate aspects of my subject. Also a big thank you to Rosalie Basten, without whom it would be much harder to be an academic writing on such peculiar subjects as magic and esotericism.

Part of the work for the present edition took place during a research fellowship at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS) in Wassenaar. I would like to thank the Institute for providing me with an exceptional environment for research, convenient as any scholar would wish it to be.

The last thought is, as it should be, for Barbara Philipp, the companion of my life and the mother of my children, without whose patience, understanding and affection it would have been a much harder task for me to complete this book.

Amsterdam, 24 August 2013

Abbreviations

ACS	Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome).
BNP/E3	Biblioteca Nacional (Lisbon), Espólio Fernando Pessoa. This is the collection of Pessoa's papers.
FP	Fuller Papers (Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London). Collection of manuscript and typed documents connected to General J. F. C. Fuller.
OA	Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO) Archives. This collection is not directly accessible to scholars, but the organization's authorities willingly provided copies of the specific documents.
RP	Regardie Papers. Private collection of Mrs Maria Babwahsingh. The documents in this collection are not catalogued, and therefore do not have call numbers.
YC	Yorke Collection (Warburg Institute, London). The collection is centred around Gerald Yorke's legacy, and is subdivided into three parts: a collection of printed materials (simply indicated by the call number); a first collection of manuscripts (which were given by Yorke to the Library from the mid-1960s on and which, according to current usage, is referred to as "old series" and is indicated here by YC/OS, then the call number); and a second collection of manuscripts (a "new series" which joined the old series in 1984, and which will be indicated here by YC/NS, then the call number).

❧ Introduction

Why should one take any serious interest in such a bizarre character as Aleister Crowley? Even if scholars have now begun to show an interest in him and the number of serious studies devoted to him is slowly increasing, it is still easier to find books that describe him in a sensationalist manner, as a bogeyman or a charlatan or both – just as it was the case during his lifetime. Sometimes even authors who have already done courageous pioneering work in the critical and historical study of esoteric movements, and who have had to defend the subjects of their research from suspicion and from attempts at marginalization, have not held back from voicing expressions of contempt when considering Crowley. A significant example can be found in Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, a milestone in the research on Jewish esotericism. Scholem describes Crowley's use of certain Kabbalistic ideas as "highly coloured humbug" and takes a sharper tone in a later note: "No words need be wasted on the subject of Crowley's 'Kabbalistic' writings."¹

With the emergence of new fields of research, such as the history of Western esotericism and the study of new religious movements, scholars have begun to delve beyond Crowley's personality and to study him more methodically and attentively as an author. It has been realized, in fact, that Crowley represents an essential source for the understanding of a broad category of new religious movements, ranging from neo-paganism to Satanism.² And with the development of the academic study of esoteric movements, scholars have begun to emancipate themselves from "conservative" positions such as that of Scholem, and have broadened their field of investigation to include authors and movements that have only entered the realm of academic research in the past few years.³

Being therefore convinced that an author such as Aleister Crowley should be considered as a valid and respectable subject for scholarly research, I have decided to focus on a specific aspect of his persona, namely his relationship to politics. The study of the connections between esotericism and politics, particularly in the last two hundred years, is no novelty in itself.⁴ For instance, the well-known study by George Mosse on the cultural origins of the Third Reich, first published in 1964, presented the history of various German currents and movements prior to the First World War, which in certain cases may be placed in a grey zone between esotericism and politics.⁵ Mosse's research in this direction was further developed, this time in a broader European perspective and with an increased interest for the specifically esoteric aspects, by the Scottish scholar James Webb.⁶ Webb's assumption was that one of the characteristic historical phenomena of Western history during the last two centuries had been what he called the "flight from reason". This flight, in his view, was a reaction "to patterns of thought and society that

were emerging as a product of eighteenth-century rationalism”,⁷ or in other words, a rejection of modernity with its rationalist and materialist aspects. The phenomenon was particularly accentuated, according to Webb, during times of social or political tension.

Although Webb’s studies are today still a gold mine of information, his essential theses now seem a little dated. An approach of this kind assumes a polarity between two divergent and contrasting forces which Webb identifies as “rationalism” and “irrationalism”. The clashing between these two ideological forces, according to him, is “one of the greatest battles fought in the 20th century”.⁸ Unfortunately, the question of how to define these two forces in historical terms, and how to identify them concretely with particular authors or movements, remains open. And when the phenomenon is subjected to closer scrutiny, we find that in many cases – even taking for granted an unambiguous definition of “rationality” – the boundaries between rationalism and irrationalism tend to become rather blurry.

More recently, Jean-Pierre Laurant and Joscelyn Godwin have presented the question in a new light.⁹ Their works highlight an element that is more easily identifiable and definable in historical terms: namely, the relationship of occultist currents not so much to rationality, but rather to Christianity. This new parameter, namely the varying distance of esoteric and occultist movements from Christianity during the nineteenth century – a distance that can be partly measured by the re-emergence of thematic elements coming from the tradition of the Enlightenment – makes the analysis of the phenomenon more concrete, and offers us a clearer view of the internal and external dynamics acting upon the various currents of occultism. Crowley’s case is undoubtedly better understandable in this framework than in the context outlined by Webb. In fact, as I hope to make clear in my analysis, it is impossible – or at least highly problematic – to speak of a “flight from reason” in Crowley’s case, whereas it is certainly legitimate to speak of a flight from Christianity.

According to Godwin, who has studied the occultist phenomenon in England in particular, this parameter can also be connected with a possible distinction between a left-wing esotericism, with liberal and progressive tendencies, and a right-wing esotericism, reactionary and conservative.¹⁰ An example of the first type would be Madame Blavatsky’s theosophy. René Guénon’s traditionalism, on the other hand, would belong to the latter type. If we accept this distinction, Crowley seems, at first sight, to fall on the left rather than on the right. But actually, in his case, things become rather more complicated. As we will see, there were two Crowleys: one was a rationalist sympathetic to the values of the Enlightenment, the other was a romantic and a reactionary. The first one had studied at Cambridge, believed in progress and rejected Christianity with the arguments of the positivist and liberal thinkers. The second one did *not* believe in progress and in the positive aspects of modern civilization, and yearned for a return to the feudal age. In this sense, it could also be said that Crowley epitomized the crisis that first characterized the late Victorian, and then the Edwardian, society. Crowley expressed this period of transition very clearly, even though the transition remained incomplete in him.

Another important precedent in studies on politics and esotericism can be found in the works of Giorgio Galli.¹¹ In fact, my research developed initially from his studies. Crowley’s name appears in his books several times in reference to historical events

whose details are not yet entirely clear (such as Rudolf Hess's flight to Britain). The present work is an attempt to offer some new elements in this direction.

More specifically about the content of this book, I may point out that my analysis focuses on two levels at the same time: the level of facts, and the level of ideas. Regarding the first level, Crowley probably holds an unusual record: the number of defamatory or simply ridiculous legends that have gathered around his person is truly staggering,¹² and one of the first tasks faced by the scholar who wishes to approach him with the necessary seriousness is to shine some light into this jumble of falsehood and truth. In Chapter 1, therefore, I will offer a brief outline of his life, thus giving the reader a clearer background for the content of the following chapters.

In Chapter 2, I will focus more specifically on Crowley's ideas. I will examine some of Crowley's texts, trying to highlight their possible political significance. Crowley did not write much explicitly on politics, but it is my conviction that his body of work is replete with fascinating political implications. I will devote ample space to his youth and to the formation of his political sensibility. In this chapter I will also touch upon the rather sensitive topic of his position with respect to the radical politics of his time, particularly Nazism.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I will seek to reconstruct events of political significance in which Crowley was involved. In Chapter 3 I will discuss in particular the relationship he had with various persons having some political influence at the time, such as the British Army general and right-wing activist J. F. C. Fuller, the British journalist and politician Tom Driberg, the *Times*'s Moscow correspondent Walter Duranty, the adventurer Gerald Hamilton and the British secret service officer Maxwell Knight. This last person turns out to be particularly interesting, because his relationship with Crowley allows me to shed some light upon the background behind Rudolf Hess's flight to Scotland in 1941.¹³ Particular importance is given to the 1930 encounter between Crowley and the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, which is the main subject of Chapter 4. This meeting was significant both because of the legends that took shape around it and because of Pessoa's personality. Besides being a poet, he was a political thinker and esotericist, and his ideas have a certain relevance to the subject of this book. I have also considered it appropriate to explore the interest Crowley awakened in other Portuguese intellectuals who were friends with Pessoa. This aspect had been relatively neglected by Pessoan specialists – even by those who had focused on his relationship with Crowley.

In the fifth and final chapter, I will examine the way in which Crowley has been perceived in certain circles, particularly traditionalism and the milieus of conspiracy theories. Guénorian traditionalism views Crowley as a representative of the so-called “counter-initiation”, and Guénon characterized Crowley as a “shady figure” and a “puppet” in the hands of sinister and perverse forces. This point of view however was not shared by another important traditionalist thinker: Julius Evola. I will try to pinpoint the reasons for this different attitude. I will then briefly discuss Crowley's relationship with another traditionalist author, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, during Crowley's long sojourn in the United States. Guénon's opinion of Crowley was similar to that of the “conspiracy theorists”, who attributed a political role to him that went well beyond his actual influence, and probably even his intentions. The anxiety generated by Crowley's image as a dangerous subversive was undoubtedly the reason why the Italian political

police kept a file on him in the 1930s, on whose curious story I will also focus in this chapter.

At the end of the book the reader will find two appendixes. One is an essay by H. Thomas Hakl on Crowley as he was perceived by the Italian traditionalist thinker Julius Evola. Hakl has been able to dig deeper into this question, and has been able to find information that brings new light to it. In Appendix 2, on the other hand, the reader will find a selection of documents that are discussed throughout the book and are of a certain interest in relation to its subject.

I hope to offer with this study a contribution to the “normalization” of Aleister Crowley as a subject of scholarly research. I believe that today, more than sixty years after his death, he can be studied for what he was: a complex, intriguing author who has left a body of work that is remarkable for its vastness and variety, and who still exerts a notable influence over several new religious movements today. The controversial aspects in the personality and activities of a man who, like Dante’s Semiramis, “made lust licit in his law”¹⁴ will certainly not be ignored or downplayed; but neither will they be used as a pretext for denying the significance of his works and ideas.

❧ 1. An unspeakable life

... one Crowley, a person of unspeakable life ...

(W. B. Yeats, letter to Lady Gregory, 28 April 1900)

Status quæstionis

In this chapter, I will retrace the salient moments in the life of Aleister Crowley.¹ But first I would like to make a few remarks about sources, which are made necessary by the peculiarity of the subject. Crowley has attracted the attention of a good number of authors, and in the last sixty years a good number of biographies and monographs devoted to him have been published.

John Symonds (1914–2006), whom Crowley himself designated as his literary executor, is the author of the biography considered by many as the “standard” one. Crowley, before his death, allegedly asked Symonds to take care of the publication of his unpublished works and of preparing new editions of those published during his life, also giving him the task of making sure that his wishes concerning the revenues from the copyright would be respected.² By virtue of this, after Crowley’s death, Symonds had the opportunity to look through all his manuscripts, original documents, diaries and letters; and his reconstruction was based on this material. Between 1951 and 1997, Symonds’s biography went through several editions, often with changes and added material.³ Practically everyone who has taken any kind of interest in Crowley has referred to Symonds’s work. However, it certainly has its critics – sometimes very harsh, too, and usually from “Crowleyan” milieus.

What are the faults that these critics perceive in Symonds’s biography? They mainly accuse it of being very biased, of presenting only the negative traits of Crowley’s character and of having not in the least understood the meaning and goal of his work. It is true that, if a careful reader compares the sources used by Symonds and analyses the way in which he has used them, he cannot but notice how his biography is tendentious on several points, and how it shows a certain preconceived hostility toward Crowley. Perhaps it is worth giving an example. Referring to the way in which Crowley “cured” the neurosis of one of his disciples, Symonds writes:

Crowley cured psychoses and neuroses in this wise. He saw that the mind or psyche was divided into a conscious and subconscious level; that was part of the occult tradition. The notion of the subconsciousness as a dynamic and disturbing force he took from Freud, without any acknowledgment. It would have been

difficult for Crowley to have made this acknowledgment in the light of his belief in himself as the greatest living psychologist.⁴

This remark is inaccurate to say the least; one need only flip through *The Confessions*, Crowley's voluminous autobiography, to find abundant explicit references to, and implicit acknowledgement of, not only Freud and his theories, but also Carl Gustav Jung.⁵ Crowley also wrote a short essay on psychoanalysis, which was published in *Vanity Fair* in 1916.⁶ It may be true that he considered himself the greatest living psychologist, but ordinarily he had no problem acknowledging ideas he borrowed from others.

The above passage is merely one of many examples of the hostility Symonds indisputably shows towards Crowley. And yet, on the other hand, the wealth of documentary material placed at his disposal still enabled him to produce so complete a reconstruction that his biography remains indispensable today for those who want to do less prejudiced research on Crowley, and to some extent even for Crowley's current followers.⁷

Symonds's most outspoken critics have undoubtedly been Israel Regardie (1907–1985) and Gerald Suster (1951–2001). Israel Regardie was a highly important figure in twentieth-century Anglo-American occultism, and was also Crowley's personal secretary and disciple from 1928 to 1931.⁸ His fame is due principally to the publication of the rituals of the Golden Dawn, the magical order to which both he and Crowley belonged.⁹ In the late 1960s, after having read Symonds's work, Regardie decided to write a kind of "counter-biography" of Crowley. The result was the publication, in 1970, of *The Eye in the Triangle*.¹⁰ In this book, Regardie, taking advantage of his training as a Reichian psychoanalyst, endeavours to give a more sympathetic interpretation of Crowley, although not concealing the more negative, or even pathological, aspects of his character. Regardie's study offers many interesting insights for understanding Crowley's way of thinking, motivations and aspirations, and has helped me to understand the meaning of his magical practices by providing an "insider's view". However, apart from a few useful corrections and clarifications, it offers few factual details that are not already present in Symonds's work.

Almost twenty years later, in 1988, Gerald Suster published his book on Crowley, *The Legacy of the Beast*.¹¹ Suster was a very active figure in Crowleyan circles in England.¹² Much the same can be said of Suster's book as of Regardie's. Although offering no new elements of great relevance, Suster likewise seeks to give a more positive interpretation of Crowley's personality and of his magical and mystical research.

A more ambiguous position concerning Symonds's work was taken by Kenneth Grant (1924–2011), who published several studies of Crowley.¹³ Grant was one of Crowley's disciples during the last years of Crowley's life, and later claimed the title of international head of the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), the fraternal order led by Crowley for many years (from 1925 to 1947).¹⁴ Grant's name was associated with that of Symonds for a long time. Starting in the late 1960s, Symonds and Grant together edited for publication a good number of texts and documents by Crowley.¹⁵ Symonds made no secret of supporting Grant's claims; in fact, in 1989, he dedicated the third edition of his biography to Grant himself, whom he styled "X^o- Outer Head of the Ordo Templi Orientis".¹⁶ Grant's works are interesting, because they are based to a large

extent on primary sources that are difficult to access, but one should still approach them with scholarly reserve. He presents his personal interpretation of Crowley's work, which, valid as it may be in his own perspective, appears removed in some respects from Crowley's original intentions. From a biographical point of view, Grant adds a few new details based on his own reminiscences, especially concerning the final years of Crowley's life.¹⁷

Several other biographies of Crowley in English have appeared over the years. In particular, I should mention those of Charles Richard Cammell, Francis King, Colin Wilson, Roger Hutchinson, Martin Booth, Lawrence Sutin, Richard Kaczynski and Tobias Churton.¹⁸ Cammell, like Symonds, knew Crowley personally during the last years of his life, and was fascinated above all by his poetic works. In fact, Crowley himself asked Cammell to write his biography in the late 1930s, after he had lost hope of publishing his *Confessions* in their entirety. Cammell was only able to satisfy this request after Crowley's death, and the book was not published until 1951, the same year as Symonds's biography. The final parts of Cammell's book are fascinating; he recalls his friendship with Crowley, offering some details about the last period of his life, and his judgements are certainly more balanced than those of Symonds. But, apart from that, the book follows the text of the *Confessions* (which, being then still partly unpublished, he must have received from Crowley) without adding much new information. The same goes for Francis King's book, first published in 1977. Colin Wilson's book, developing ideas presented earlier in a chapter of his classic study of occult phenomena,¹⁹ is not really a biography, but rather an attempt at interpretation in a similar vein as that of Regardie. In my view, however, his analyses do not offer any interesting new insight for understanding Crowley; on the contrary, the book shows a rather imprecise knowledge of Crowley's works and ideas.²⁰ Hutchinson's biography offers some new information not found in other works, especially concerning the topic of this present work. Crowley's time in the United States is discussed thoroughly, along with his activities in pro-German propaganda, including an analysis of the file that the English police kept on him over the years.

I have already discussed elsewhere the biographies of Booth, Sutin and Kaczynski, and I may refer the reader to the review article I have written on them.²¹ Here, I will merely note that all three represent a serious effort to offer a valid alternative to Symonds's biography. Sutin, in particular, delves into Crowley's psychology as perhaps no other author has done before, and offers some stimulating insights. Kaczynski's book, although often giving an overly softened, almost sanitized, image of Crowley (obviously with the intent of balancing out Symonds's preconceived hostility), is based on an impressive amount of research and is a very useful tool for the scholar, not only because it discusses some facts and events in Crowley's life that had received little or no attention from previous biographers, but also because it includes a rich apparatus of footnotes and bibliographic references. The book has been recently republished in a revised and expanded edition, which improves considerably on the first one.²²

Only two significant biographies of Crowley have been published after my review article of 2003. The first one is by Tobias Churton. Churton, like Kaczynski, is very sympathetic to Crowley, and his book can be considered as another attempt at "setting the record straight" in presenting a more positive account of Crowley's actions, motivations and ideas. Now, as is the case with Kaczynski's book, if this means using solid

evidence to correct wild or unsubstantiated claims, the intent should be appreciated. And indeed, Churton does make use of previously unpublished sources that may throw new light on some episodes in Crowley's life. But I would be less inclined to follow Churton's enthusiastic judgement when he presents Crowley as a "major thinker, as significant as Freud or Jung", or when he discusses what he considers as Crowley's "five principal achievements", which have more to do with a spiritual agenda than with a scholarly one.²³

The second important book on Crowley that has been published after 2003 is Richard B. Spence's *Secret Agent 666: Aleister Crowley, British Intelligence and the Occult*.²⁴ This is not really a biography, but a monograph presenting all possible evidence about Crowley's connection to the intelligence services of various countries, especially the British. Obviously, Spence's book bears on aspects that are also relevant for the present study, and I will discuss them more specifically in the next chapters. But a few general comments are in order here. Spence basically interprets the whole of Crowley's adult life as if he had had a continuous, consistent involvement in intelligence activities. Almost any episode in his life, any travel, any apparently casual meeting with other persons, is seen in this light and interpreted accordingly. Spence, a professor at the University of Idaho, clearly has a deep knowledge of the history of secret services, since it is his very field of expertise. His book is based on a considerable amount of research in archives and exploits interesting new material. It seems to me however that he is rarely able to find the "smoking gun" of Crowley's work as a "secret agent" and is mostly obliged to recur to hypotheses and speculations, which sometimes become thin to the point of implausibility. It is true that, by its very nature, the subject is elusive and slippery, but the problem is that when a whole castle is built on a series of speculative arguments, one begins to wonder about the solidity of the whole structure. If one examines carefully the actual evidence that is available, and which Spence has so carefully collected, the picture one gets is that Crowley, on several occasions in his life, acted as an informant to British intelligence services, and that most of the time this happened out of his own initiative rather than because he was being asked. But being a voluntary informant is of course not the same thing as being an agent employed on a permanent basis by a secret service.

There is then another problem, which makes Spence's approach very different from the one I tried to adopt for the present study. Throughout his book Spence tries to argue that whenever Crowley was involved in secret intelligence operations – which seems to be all the time – he was just serving England. Even when evidence seems to indicate the contrary, all can be interpreted as a skilful game of deception and simulation played for the better interest of his home country. Ultimately, this yields a simplistic image of a politically monotonous Crowley, as if he had been stubbornly, naïvely consistent in his patriotic faith during all his life, despite all the sacrifices and the suffering that this entailed. This is of course the image that Crowley tried to give of himself in the later part of his life, namely after the First World War. The problem is that, as I will try to show in the next chapter, this does not fit either with the evidence we have, based on Crowley's youth writings, nor more generally with Crowley's personality as I have come to understand it. Crowley's psychology was extremely complex and multi-layered, and the idea of a Crowley permanently and consistently inspired by candid patriotism is simply untenable. There was indeed one part of his personality that would easily respond to the

call of patriotism, and even of nationalism, but that was very far from being the whole story about him.

A few other monographs should be mentioned here, published in other languages than English: a book by Serge Hutin in French,²⁵ one by Ralph Tegtmeier in German,²⁶ and, most recently, one by Ruud Vermeer in Dutch.²⁷ Hutin is inclined to give a little too much credit to the more fantastic rumours that have crystallized around the figure of Crowley, but he makes an honest effort to penetrate the more enigmatic sides of his personality, making use of his erudition as a specialist in the history of esotericism. The book by Tegtmeier, a person well known in German occultist circles, is also interesting since it draws attention to the issue of politics and attempts to situate Crowley's figure in a broader cultural framework, often with pertinent observations. Vermeer's biography, taking a popular slant, adds practically nothing to the preceding ones, apart from a final discussion of Crowley's relationship to cinema, with a few pages devoted to the American underground film director Kenneth Anger (b. 1927), who took inspiration for some of his most important works from Crowley and his doctrine.²⁸

In general, most of the authors cited above, with a few notable exceptions, take a fairly journalistic approach. Sources and references are often not indicated, and in most cases Crowley's scandalous behaviour takes the upper hand over the intellectual and cultural aspects. But more recently, a new trend of research on Crowley has emerged that shows a more scrupulous approach from a scholarly point of view, often making use of archives and unpublished sources. Some of the authors are, or have been, involved in the OTO, such as William Breeze (signing sometimes also with his name as international head of the OTO, Hymenaeus Beta). Breeze has prepared new editions of Crowley's works, accompanying them with very informative introductions and copious notes,²⁹ while J. Edward and Marlene Cornelius have published, between 1993 and 2002, the fascinating periodical of "Thelemic research", *Red Flame*. Richard Kaczynski, whose biography I have already referred to, could also be included among these authors. Beyond these circles, a few other names should be mentioned. One is the American author Martin P. Starr, who has offered with his research and his editorial work some important contributions for a better understanding of Crowley and of his influence.³⁰ Another is the French author Christian Bouchet, who has been one of the first authors to devote a university dissertation to Crowley. Initially, Bouchet published a short monograph on Crowley in 1988, followed in 1998 by the publication of his doctoral thesis.³¹ Bouchet, who has been very active not only in French Crowleyan circles, but also in the far-right political scene, has shown a particular, if not an innocent, interest in Crowley's relationship with politics, and his books offer a fair introduction (in French) to Crowley's works and ideas.

But the real turning point in scholarly research on Aleister Crowley has been the recent publication of an anthology of essays edited by Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr and published by Oxford University Press, to which I have also contributed.³² The book is a testimony of the interest that Crowley now offers as a subject for serious scholarly research, and is in fact only the most significant example of a more general trend that has materialized in the last fifteen years.³³ Some well-known academic specialists in new religious movements and Western esotericism have contributed to the book, such as Henrik Bogdan himself, Alex Owen, Massimo Introvigne, Ronald Hutton and Hugh B. Urban, while Wouter J. Hanegraaff has written the foreword.

After this short overview of the existing literature, I would like to retrace now the essential moments of Crowley's life, focusing especially on those aspects that appear to be particularly significant for the purpose of this book. My main sources will be the biographies by Symonds, Sutin and Kaczynski.

Birth and youth (1875–98)

Edward Alexander Crowley (he adopted a Gaelic form of his name, Aleister, when he was about twenty) was born on 12 October 1875 in Leamington, Warwickshire, to Edward Crowley (c.1830–87) and Emily Bertha Bishop (1848–1917). His father owned a flourishing interest in the railway business, which had brought the family significant wealth. Both parents were members of a fundamentalist Christian sect, the Plymouth Brethren or Darbyites, characterized by extreme moral rigour and devoted to a literal interpretation of the Bible.³⁴ His father's parents were Quakers, but Crowley's father converted to Darbyism, and then decided to set aside his business activities in order to devote himself to itinerant preaching.³⁵ Young Crowley was obliged to take part in the family's daily Bible readings, and for a long time this was the only book available to him.³⁶ This played an enormously important role in his intellectual development: even though he gradually repudiated Christianity, he still remained always connected to the legacy of images and symbols in the Old and New Testaments, showing a predilection for the prophetic texts. In these early years of his life he was already fascinated by the evil figures in the Book of Revelation: the beast coming out of the earth and the prostitute dressed in purple and scarlet.³⁷ This influenced considerably the religious doctrine he later elaborated.

There do not seem to have been important episodes in young Crowley's life (if we except, of course, the peculiarity of his family's religious devotion) until the death of his father from cancer in 1887. This event marked a turning point: from the time of the funeral, as Crowley himself said, he entered into a new phase characterized by rebellion.³⁸ Crowley developed a strong sense of intolerance toward the religiosity and closed-mindedness of his mother and her family, as well as toward the rigid discipline of the Darbyite boarding school that he was obliged to attend. As a result of the rigorous discipline in one of these schools, Crowley's health was seriously affected. But the two immediate consequences of this physical weakening contributed to the alleviation of his moral suffering, and had great significance in his development: the doctors advised the family to take the boy out of school at once, have him study with private tutors for a while, and make him spend plenty of time out in the fresh open air. Following the first piece of advice, the family made a fatal error: one of his tutors, instead of furthering his education as an impeccable Darbyite, initiated him into various worldly pleasures, including smoking, drinking, horse racing, billiards, gambling and women.³⁹ The tutor was dismissed, but it was already too late. Crowley later, with a typical allusion to the biblical text, described the effect of this experience thus: "My eyes were opened and I had become as a god, knowing good and evil."⁴⁰ The second piece of advice led to his passion for mountain climbing, which he strongly developed later in life.

In his autobiography, Crowley provides an outline of his political ideas during his early twenties. I will discuss the subject more at length in Chapter 2, but here I should

mention the fact that in that period he considered himself a “reactionary conservative” and a Jacobite.⁴¹ We can already see here the signs of the romantic side of his personality.

In October 1895, Crowley entered Trinity College, Cambridge. The university experience made a profound impression on him, even if he did not obtain a degree after three years of attendance. When he enrolled and moved to Cambridge he finally felt free from the influence of his maternal family and the tutors they had imposed on him. He studied the classics with enthusiasm, both ancients and moderns, and began publishing the poems he had been writing for a while at his own expense. *Aceldama* (1898) was his first book, and was followed by, among others, *Songs of the Spirit* (1898) and *An Appeal to the American Republic* (1899). His first publisher was Leonard Smithers (1861–1907), who had also published the works of Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) and Aubrey Beardsley (1872–98).⁴² During the holidays he went on long journeys abroad, especially to Scandinavia and the Alps. In 1896, at the age of 21, he inherited the conspicuous fortune left behind by his father, and thus became financially independent from his family.⁴³

In this period, Crowley began to feel an attraction to spirituality and mysticism. At first, he went through a phase in which he intended to devote himself to Satanism. This lasted until the early months of 1898, when he came in contact with Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942).⁴⁴ Waite advised him to read a classic of esotericism: *The Cloud upon the Sanctuary*, by Karl von Eckartshausen. This reading kindled Crowley’s desire to become part of a “hidden community of Light … whose sainted members watched over the welfare of mankind”.⁴⁵ In the same year, Crowley met two persons who were destined to influence the course of his life considerably. The first was Oscar Eckenstein (1859–1921), a railway engineer and mountaineer; the second was George Cecil Jones (1873–1960), a chemist by profession and a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. I will return later to Crowley’s friendship with Eckenstein. His meeting with Jones had an immediate, significant consequence: when Crowley learned from him about the existence of the Golden Dawn he asked to become a member, and his request was accepted. From this moment on, his life took a new direction. The experiences he was about to have in this occultist brotherhood would leave an indelible mark on him. Without a correct evaluation of this aspect, it would be difficult to understand the course his life took in the subsequent years.

The romantic period (1898–1906)

In November 1898 Crowley was initiated as a Neophyte in the Isis Urania Temple of the Golden Dawn in London. At this time the head of the Order was Samuel Liddell “MacGregor” Mathers (1854–1918).⁴⁶ It is unnecessary here to retrace the convoluted history of this organization; suffice it to say that at this time the Order was suffering from various internal conflicts, which would soon erupt into a dramatic crisis.⁴⁷ Crowley, who had abandoned his university studies and moved to London in the same year, immediately devoted himself with great passion to studying the Order’s materials and practising the rituals in order to get past the first degrees quickly. During a ceremony at the temple, he made the acquaintance of Allan Bennett (1872–1923), an influential member of the Order who would later convert to Buddhism and become

one of its “greatest propagators … in England”⁴⁸ Bennett moved into Crowley’s flat, and together they performed various experiments in ceremonial magic. Bennett suffered from asthma, and took opium, cocaine and morphine to alleviate the symptoms. Crowley also began using mind-altering substances, and it is probably in this context that the idea first arose for him to use them not for a curative or recreational use, but in order to experiment with their efficacy in bringing about mystical experiences. The consumption of drugs remained a constant throughout his life. In this period he also bought a property in Scotland, at Boleskine on the banks of Loch Ness. Originally, he planned to use it as a retreat for the practice of a series of magical rituals.⁴⁹

In 1900 the crisis in the Golden Dawn exploded, and Crowley found himself directly involved in the events that led to the end of the Order in its original form. What actually happened was a revolt on the part of several high-ranking members, led by the poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) and the actress Florence Farr (1860–1917), against the authority of Mathers, who at the time lived in Paris. Crowley took Mathers’s side and tried, though with very little diplomacy, to bring the rebels back into line. He was not successful: the rebel group expelled Mathers and continued the Order’s activity, no longer recognizing Mathers’s authority. Crowley was also excluded. After less than two years, his adventure with the Golden Dawn – at least the original version of it – was practically over. According to Crowley, he was advanced by Mathers to the level of *Adeptus Minor* during this period, although his rank was not recognized by the rebel faction. However, this has been contested by some authors.⁵⁰

After this, Crowley began a period of world travelling and mountaineering lasting a few years. His interest in magic, still strong when he left the Golden Dawn, diminished and was replaced by a fascination with yoga and Buddhism under Allan Bennett’s influence. Meanwhile, he was very prolific in his poetry: he published several works in verse, but also essays, in luxurious editions. Among the most significant works from this period are *Carmen Saeculare* (1901), *Tannhäuser* (1902) and *Berashith* (1903), the latter being his first attempt at an essay on magic.

In the spring of 1900, soon after his involvement in the conflict between Mathers and the London adepts, he travelled to Mexico, where Eckenstein joined him. Together, they climbed the country’s highest peaks. After a few months, Crowley decided to go to Ceylon (today Sri Lanka) to meet with Bennett, who was living on the island and would soon convert to Buddhism. Crossing the Pacific, he visited Hawaii and then Japan before finally reaching his friend. With Bennett he began to study the texts of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions and to practise various forms of meditation and yoga. In 1902 he met with Eckenstein in Delhi. They had in view a new mountaineering expedition, more ambitious than their Mexican climbs: to reach the peak of K2.

At the time, the highest mountain in the Karakorum range still had a virgin peak, as did all the other mountains in Asia higher than 8000 metres (the so-called “eight-thousanders”). The expedition was not successful – mainly due to adverse weather conditions – but still, it was the first ever attempt to conquer this peak, reaching altitudes not attained by any previous mountaineering expedition.⁵¹

Subsequently, in late 1902, Crowley returned to Europe and settled in Paris. For some time he pursued a Bohemian lifestyle, mingling with artists and writers including Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), Marcel Schwob (1867–1905) and William Somerset Maugham (1874–1965).⁵² In spring 1903 he left Paris to spend some time at his property

in Scotland. There he met Rose Edith Kelly (1874–1932), the sister of one of his closest friends, the English painter Gerald F. Kelly (1879–1972). She and Crowley married and left on a long voyage to the Orient. On the return journey, the second of two fundamental spiritual events in Crowley's life took place (the first having been, as we saw, his initiation into the Golden Dawn). Crowley claims that, while the couple were staying in Cairo, between the 8 and 10 April 1904, he "received" from a superhuman entity, the text of *The Book of the Law*. This text would have been dictated to him directly by this entity, called Aiwass, whom he would partially identify in the years to come as his "Holy Guardian Angel". This was an event of decisive importance in Crowley's life: to mention just one example, he later began using a new calendar, the beginning of which coincided with the date of this revelation. In Crowley's view, *The Book of the Law* was to be the fundamental sacred text of a new religion, of which he himself would be the prophet: the religion of Thelema.⁵³ It appears, however, that Crowley did not immediately take on this role of prophet that *The Book of the Law* assigned to him. Rather, as his interest in magic gradually re-emerged after his Buddhist phase, he again felt a connection to the old system of symbols of traditional magic that he had learned in the Golden Dawn.

After returning to Europe, Crowley and his wife spent a few months in Paris before settling in Scotland. During this time in Paris, Crowley was initiated as a Freemason into a lodge of the Grand Lodge of France, an obedience not recognized by the United Grand Lodge of England.⁵⁴ In this period he published more significant works, such as the drama *Why Jesus Wept* (1904), and began releasing his earlier writings in a compilation, *The Collected Works*, in three volumes (1905–7). In the spring of 1905 he decided to attempt climbing another of Asia's colossal peaks: Kangchenjunga. This time Eckenstein did not take part, and Crowley himself led the expedition. The attempt ended in another failure; to make matters worse, one of the climbers and some of the porters died, resulting in a series of controversies between Crowley and the other members of the expedition.⁵⁵ After that, Crowley decided to remain in Asia for some time, and sent for his wife to join him. Together, they travelled across southern China on horseback. During this journey, he practised a highly significant ritual of his own invention: the *Augoeides*. Although Symonds does not explain its meaning, the ritual, which lasted thirty-two weeks, was extremely important for Crowley, who devotes many pages to it in his autobiography.⁵⁶

It is worth noting that even after Crowley left the Golden Dawn, and throughout his Buddhist period, he still continued to work with the system of symbols and degrees that he had learned from the Order, and continued his initiatory ascent still following the Order's scheme. This is a highly important point, because Crowley's whole life – at least until the mid-1920s – was built around the scheme of degrees of the Golden Dawn. This means that each degree he "obtained" in this system marked a precisely defined phase in his life, and influenced his choices and movements. The meaning of the *Augoeides* ritual, according to him, lay in the fact that "it was necessary to complete the work of the Second Order before I could adequately take up my work in the Third".⁵⁷ The *Augoeides* was a lengthy, imaginary initiation ritual. While riding across China, Crowley *imagined* himself being in a temple and carrying out ritual gestures, the ultimate goal being initiation into a higher degree.

Having arrived at the east coast of Indochina (present-day Vietnam), Crowley and his wife continued their travels separately: while she returned to Europe by the classic

route (in a ship, via the Suez Canal), he headed east, and after a stop in Shanghai, crossed the Pacific, the United States, and the Atlantic. In June 1906 he was back in England. Thus the period of his great voyages around the world was concluded.

The Logos of the Aeon (1906–19)

After returning from China, Crowley had met a British Army officer, Captain John Frederick Charles Fuller (1878–1966), with whom he had been corresponding for about a year. Fuller would, in later years, become famous as a theoretician of military tactics (especially in connection with tanks). He would then also become active in the British Union of Fascists (the party founded by Sir Oswald Mosley in the 1930s), and would be invited to Adolf Hitler's fiftieth birthday celebration in 1939. Fuller took part in a contest arranged by Crowley for the best critical essay on his work, and won.⁵⁸ Crowley published the essay, and Fuller became one of his close collaborators.

1907 and 1908 passed by relatively quietly, with the publication of some new works (*Konx Om Pax*, 1907; *Amphora*, 1908) and voyages to north Africa; but his marriage was now getting close to its end. During this period, thanks to Fuller, Crowley acquired some young admirers, mostly students at Trinity College, Cambridge. It seems clear that by now his reputation had begun to be a problem, given that the authorities of Trinity College sought to prevent his having contact with the students. One student, resisting pressure, became a disciple of Crowley's straight away, and another would become a disciple a decade later. The first was Victor Neuburg (1883–1940), later known as a poet and mentor to Dylan Thomas,⁵⁹ the second was Norman Mudd (1889–1934), then a promising student of mathematics.⁶⁰

1909 was an important year, for two main reasons. First, Crowley found again the manuscript of *The Book of the Law*, which had been lost in the meanwhile. From this time on, his conviction that he was the prophet of a new religion grew stronger and stronger. Second, with George Cecil Jones, his old colleague from the Golden Dawn, he formed a new magical group of his own, the A.:A.:⁶¹ This was essentially a revised version of the Golden Dawn, largely inspired by its system of symbols and degrees, but with the introduction of certain spiritual techniques learned by Crowley during his travels in the East. Along with the creation of his Order, he began the publication of a journal, *The Equinox*, which was presented as the official organ of the A.:A.: The editorial programme planned for the publication of one issue at each equinox, meaning two issues each year, for a period of five years. Many of the contributions in *The Equinox* were written by Crowley, but also most of his friends at the time worked on the journal with him, especially Fuller. The writer Frank Harris (1856–1931) also contributed an article.⁶² In this same year Crowley divorced his wife, their relationship having increasingly deteriorated over time.

1909 was also an important year for another reason. Crowley spent the last two months of this year in Algeria with Victor Neuburg, where he carried out a series of "astral explorations" based on the Enochian system.⁶³ These explorations were especially important for Crowley's magical career, since they represented his "crossing of the Abyss" and consequently his achievement of the degree of *Magister Templi*.⁶⁴

In the spring of 1910, Mathers filed suit to stop the release of the next issue (3) of *The Equinox*. He wanted to prevent the publication of the rituals of the Golden Dawn, but in the end Crowley won the case. This was an important episode, since the lawsuit had a great deal of resonance both at home and abroad, especially in esoteric circles. Crowley's name became quite well known, and through this he gained many contacts in the worlds of Freemasonry and international occultism. One of the persons who came in contact with him and went to meet him in person was Theodor Reuss (1855–1923), who had been busy with several fringe-Masonic enterprises both in Germany and elsewhere, and at the time was planning the creation of a new initiatory order. This would later become the OTO. Reuss was apparently also an agent for the German secret services.⁶⁵

In this same year in London, Crowley organized and performed a series of rituals open to the public, *The Rites of Eleusis*.⁶⁶ Several favourable reviews were published, but a few newspapers violently criticized the performances and attacked Crowley, accusing him, his disciples and his friend George Cecil Jones of immoral behaviour. This can be viewed as the first in a long series of sensationalist attacks on Crowley, which did not even end with his death.⁶⁷ It is at that time that his "black" legend began to take shape. Crowley, despite pressure from all his friends, refused to sue the newspapers for libel. Jones sued instead, and lost the case. The price Crowley paid for the unhappy outcome of this affair and for the bad reputation deriving from it was a certain degree of isolation and rifts with many of his friends, including Fuller and Jones.

In this period, in addition to *The Rites of Eleusis* (1910), he published a collection of poetry, *The Winged Beetle* (1910), and a drama in verse, *The World's Tragedy*, with a significant preface (1910). This last work is essential for understanding his attitude toward Christianity.⁶⁸ In 1912 he had another meeting with Theodor Reuss, which was highly significant because it lead to the creation of an English branch of the OTO, of which Crowley was appointed Grand Master. Reuss also initiated Crowley to the innermost "secrets" of the OTO, namely the techniques of sexual magic. The communication of this secret was of fundamental importance for Crowley. From this time on he would spend considerable time experimenting with this new type of magic. His lovers (for some of whom Crowley reserved the title of "Scarlet Woman"),⁶⁹ as well as some of his disciples, were his "assistants" in these operations. Also in 1912, the first two parts of the important *Book Four* were published, where Crowley presented for the first time his ideas on magic in a systematic fashion.

In 1913 he published *The Book of Lies*, a collection of short and mostly enigmatic essays in which some important aspects of his doctrine were distilled. In the same year, the A.:A.:, the Order founded by Crowley, listed 88 members – quite a respectable number for such an organization. In January 1914 he performed a series of invocations in Paris, which were his first experimental application of the techniques of sexual magic. His assistant was Victor Neuburg. Also participating in at least one of these rituals was Walter Duranty,⁷⁰ who would later become a very well-known journalist in his role as Moscow correspondent to the *New York Times*. I will return to Duranty in Chapter 3.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Crowley was in Switzerland. He returned to England and, according to his version of the story, applied to work for Intelligence Services, but was rejected. By now his inheritance was almost entirely gone, and in

October he left for the United States, where he planned to meet with the American collector John Quinn to sell part of his collection of books. He intended to stay for two weeks,⁷¹ but remained in the US for more than five years. Thus began Crowley's "American period". In these years, for the first time in his life, he experienced hardships and uncomfortable living conditions, at least in comparison to the luxury and wealth to which he was accustomed.

In the first months of 1915 he began collaborating with a German propaganda newspaper, *The Fatherland*, directed by the writer George Sylvester Viereck (1884–1962). Crowley had already met Viereck in London in 1911. The articles Crowley published in this period were violently anti-British. He also contributed various articles to the journal *Vanity Fair*. In October 1915 he left New York to tour the West Coast. On this voyage, in Vancouver, he met with his disciple Charles Stansfeld Jones (1886–1950), who had established a branch of the OTO in that city. In 1916 Crowley met the art critic Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) and had an affair with his wife, Alice Richardson (a.k.a. Ratan Devi), with whom he practised various operations of sexual magic. In the summer he conducted a "Great Magical Retreat" in New Hampshire. This was an important episode, because in spiritual terms it represented the central point of his sojourn in America. During this retreat Crowley initiated himself to the degree of Magus, the penultimate degree of the Golden Dawn hierarchy. Also in this period, he wrote the novel *Moonchild*, which would not be published until 1929.

In the spring of 1917, the London police stormed the headquarters of the OTO in England in reaction to the pro-German propaganda Crowley was diffusing in the United States. This appears to have been the only reaction of the British authorities to his anti-patriotic behaviour. In August of the same year, he became director of another newspaper belonging to Viereck, *The International*.⁷² He held the position for eight months, until the newspaper changed owners. The material published there (articles, poetry, stories) was almost all the work of Crowley, who took this opportunity to promote his new religion.

In the spring of 1918 he met Leah Hirsig (1883–1975), a schoolteacher who became his lover and quickly took on the official role of Scarlet Woman. Apart from his first marriage, Crowley's relationship with Hirsig was surely the most important in all of his extremely varied love life.

In December 1919 he left the United States and returned to England. The American period can be said to have been a fairly homogeneous time in his life. During these five years he experienced poverty, if not true destitution. It should be noted that Crowley considered his entire sojourn in the United States as a long initiation ritual to the degree of Magus. This is a detail of more than just secondary importance, since Crowley saw the experiences of humiliation and privation that he was forced to undergo as "ordeals" necessary for completing the initiation.⁷³

Wandering in Europe (1919–32)

Apparently, the British authorities gave Crowley no trouble after his return to England. However, he did not stay long in his homeland. His new plan was to found an "abbey"

in which a community of disciples could put the doctrines of Thelema into practice. Magical and religious aspects aside, this was in fact also a social experiment.⁷⁴ The place chosen for realizing this project was Cefalù, in Sicily, and in March 1920 the “Abbey of Thelema” was established in a rented villa. The original core group of Thelemites was composed of Crowley himself, his Scarlet Woman Leah Hirsig and a French former governess, Ninette Shumway, née Fraux (1894–1990). The experiment lasted three years, until Crowley was expelled from Italy in 1923. During this period numerous guests visited the Abbey, predominantly from England. Moments of peace and of spiritual research took turns with altercations and conflicts, and the situation at the Abbey was often less than idyllic. In late 1921 one of the recurring crises between the residents was so serious that it attracted the attention of the local police, and led to an inspection of the Abbey.

In 1922 Crowley left the Abbey temporarily for a retreat in Fontainebleau. The purpose of this trip was to overcome his addiction to heroin, which he had begun using in 1919. The attempt failed, however; he would continue using the drug until his death. In May he went to London to try to gather some funds for the Abbey. He published a few articles in *The English Review*, a literary magazine, and managed to get a contract with a publisher to write a novel, *The Diary of a Drug Fiend*, in which he described his experiences with drugs (cocaine in particular) and the Abbey of Thelema. When the book was published it was immediately denounced by the *Sunday Express* newspaper, which accused Crowley of promoting the unrestrained consumption of drugs. Crowley also began writing his autobiography, *The Confessions*, but the plans for its publication did not go through because of the increasingly frequent attacks levied by the sensationalist press. The first two volumes would be published only in 1929. Crowley returned to Cefalù in October 1922, passing through Rome during the same days in which the fascists marched through the city.⁷⁵

In February 1923 a tragic event took place at the Abbey: Raoul Loveday (1900–1923), a disciple whom Crowley had met on his last voyage to London, died, probably of enteric fever after drinking contaminated water. During Loveday’s illness, his wife, who had accompanied him to the Abbey, complained to the British consul in Palermo regarding the living conditions at the Abbey.⁷⁶ After Loveday’s death, she returned to England and held interviews with some of the same sensationalist newspapers that had already used Crowley as material, namely *John Bull* and the *Sunday Express*. As a result, the press campaign against him became increasingly more violent. On 23 April he was expelled from Italy. The day before, a new disciple had arrived at the Abbey: Norman Mudd (1889–1934), who in 1908 had been a member of his group of student admirers at Cambridge.

Crowley left for Tunisia, where he stayed until the year’s end. Here he wrote and published (at his own expense) *Songs for Italy*, a small collection of poems satirizing Mussolini and the fascist regime. In 1924 he moved to France. There he met with Frank Harris, who at the time was living in Nice; together they developed an entrepreneurial project, which led to no practical results. He then went to Paris, where his disciples joined him. He remained in France until September 1924, when he returned to Tunisia with a new lover, Dorothy Olsen.

In the spring of 1925, from Tunis, Crowley launched the “World Teacher Campaign”. In this period, the Theosophical Society, then directed by Annie Besant (1847–1933)

and Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934), was endeavouring to present to the world an Indian youth, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986), as spiritual master.⁷⁷ Besant had adopted Krishnamurti a few years earlier when he was still a young boy, being convinced that he possessed the characteristics of a new master of humanity. Crowley decided to block Besant's project through a press campaign, "unmasking" Krishnamurti, whom he saw as a false messiah. Crowley's purpose in this, naturally, was to present himself as the true "Master of the World". Although the campaign made some waves in the European press, it was not particularly successful.⁷⁸ Around this time, he also met George I. Gurdjieff (1866?–1949) at his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in Avon, close to Fontainebleau.⁷⁹

Meanwhile, Theodor Reuss had died in 1923 without leaving any clear instructions as to who should succeed him as leader of the OTO. At the end of 1924 Crowley was recognized by two of the highest ranking members of the Order (C. S. Jones and Heinrich Tränker) as Reuss's successor.⁸⁰ Further international legitimation came in the summer of 1925, when the "German Rosicrucian Movement" (which included the German OTO and "Pansophia", a related esoteric organization) organized a meeting in Weida, Thuringia. Crowley was invited to participate and the result of this meeting was that the Rosicrucian Movement split between two sides: one that accepted Crowley as their international leader, and one that rejected him.⁸¹ Probably the most important source of tension, apart from Crowley's bad reputation was the fact that, by this time, accepting Crowley as leader implicitly meant accepting also his religious message, essentially based on *The Book of the Law*. Clearly, some of these German esoteric groups were willing to listen to Crowley as an initiate and as a spiritual teacher, but not as a prophet of a new religion.

In the faction supporting Crowley the most prominent figures were Karl Germer (1885–1962), a businessman, and Martha Küntzel (1857–1941), a highly active figure in the world of German esotericism, who had been acquainted with Madame Blavatsky and involved in the Theosophical Society. Germer, in the years to come, would become Crowley's principal "sponsor", supporting him financially as well as organizationally. When Crowley died in 1947, Germer would inherit the position of international head of the OTO. After their meeting in Thuringia, Germer left Germany in order to work in closer contact with Crowley. Küntzel would also soon become one of his most indefatigable supporters in Germany. She is an interesting figure also because her name is connected to Crowley's alleged contact with Adolf Hitler – to which I shall return later.

In November 1925, while in Tunis, Crowley was contacted by a young student from Oxford, Thomas Driberg (1905–76). He would later become a well-known journalist, then follow a political career, and after being elected member of parliament with the Labour party, would become its National Secretary. In those student years, Driberg combined a passion for esotericism with militant activity in the Communist Party. In 1926 he had an intense correspondence with Crowley, in which he expressed an intent to become his disciple. Although this did not come about – and in Chapter 3 we will see why – they still remained friends and often visited one another, especially after Crowley's return to England in 1932.

Between 1926 and 1929, Crowley's main residence was in Paris. In October 1928 he was joined by a new disciple with whom he had already corresponded for a few years: Israel Regardie, then little more than twenty years old. Also in this period, Crowley

came into contact with another young man interested in his teachings: Gerald Yorke (1901–83). Yorke would remain a disciple of Crowley until 1932, when there was a temporary rupture; but after this, friendly relations between the two were re-established. Over the years, Yorke collected an impressive quantity of “Crowleyana”, including first or rare editions of books, manuscripts and documents. This collection was later donated to the library of the Warburg Institute in London, where it is still preserved today.

In March 1929 Crowley was expelled from France. It seems that several circumstances were at the origin of this episode.⁸² The expulsion made resounding echoes in the international press. Crowley, in order to obtain British citizenship for his latest Scarlet Woman, Maria Teresa Ferrari de Miramar, a Nicaraguan, and thus to be permitted to bring her into England, married her in Leipzig in August 1929. In the same month, he returned to England with his new wife and Regardie, and moved into a cottage in Kent.

He then finally succeeded in finding a publisher: a small publishing house called Mandrake, then directed by Percy Reginald Stephensen (1901–65).⁸³ Stephensen wrote a book on Crowley,⁸⁴ in an attempt to show that many of the rumours spread about him by the sensationalist press were unfounded, and brought out several of Crowley’s works that had remained unpublished for a long time, including the novel *Moonchild* and the first two volumes of the *Confessions* (1929a). In the same year Crowley also published, at his own expense, the important *Magick in Theory and Practice*, the ideal continuation of *Book Four* and his theoretical groundwork on magic.

In spring 1930 Crowley travelled to Germany with his wife. He was now thinking of preparing an exhibition of his paintings, to be held somewhere in Germany.⁸⁵ In Berlin, he met the 19-year-old artist Hanni Jaeger (1910–1933) and fell in love with her. He returned to England with her, abandoning his wife in Germany. At the end of August, Crowley and Jaeger left England for Lisbon. For about a year, Crowley had been in contact with Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935), the well-known Portuguese poet. Pessoa, a great enthusiast of esotericism, was fascinated by Crowley’s personality. As we shall see in Chapter 4, Crowley probably went to Portugal also with the intention of creating a branch of the OTO there, which would have been directed by Pessoa.

During his sojourn in Portugal, one of the most curious episodes of Crowley’s life took place: his fake suicide. With Pessoa’s collaboration, he set up a stunt to make people believe he had committed suicide by throwing himself off a cliff into the Atlantic. Then, while half of Europe’s newspapers were speculating as to his fate, he quietly reappeared in Berlin. I will examine this episode in the context of his relationship with Pessoa. Some authors have hinted at some mysterious aspects of it: the source is a reference made by René Guénon in a letter to Julius Evola from 29 October 1949, in which he claims that Crowley had faked his suicide because he wanted to return to Germany in secret in order to take on a position as Hitler’s adviser. I will of course return to the matter in Chapters 4 and 5.

From the end of September 1930 to the middle of 1932, Crowley lived in Berlin. Here he associated with Alfred Adler (1870–1937), Aldous Huxley (1894–1963),⁸⁶ Christopher Isherwood (1904–86) and most importantly Gerald Hamilton (1890–1970), a British adventurer who at the time had ties to the German Communist Party.⁸⁷ In late spring of 1932, Crowley returned to England.

Later years and death (1932–47)

Crowley did not leave England again after his return from Germany in 1932.⁸⁸ He was now fifty-seven years old; his health was not so good, probably due to the continual use of intoxicating substances, and he had a constant need for financial aid from his disciples. Nevertheless, despite appearances, these last fifteen years of his life do not seem to have been particularly unhappy. He still continued to write and publish books, and had a fairly active social life, at least until his final years, when the war forced him to find lodgings outside of London. Cammell, who got acquainted with him in 1936, described him thus:

When I met him, the promise and romance of Crowley's life were over; his best poetry and his best prose were written. He was bankrupt, ostracised. Publishers would not print his books, nor editors his articles. ... Almost any other man would have abandoned hope in such a position, would have gone into hiding, humiliated and desperate. Not so Aleister Crowley. ... His belief in his mission, real or imagined, his determination to dominate, remained inviolate.⁸⁹

After his return from Germany, Crowley settled in London. In that period, he broke off relations with the three people who had been closest to him in the previous years: Regardie, Yorke and Germer. He would have practically no more contact with Regardie until his death, although he later mended relations – at least partially – with the other two.

In 1933 he won a lawsuit against a bookseller who had advertised *The Diary of a Drug Fiend* with a placard displaying libellous statements about him. Encouraged by this success, he decided to sue his old friend Nina Hamnett (1890–1956), who had discussed the Abbey of Thelema in her memoirs.⁹⁰ The suit took place in spring 1934 and was a disaster for Crowley. During the hearings, from accuser he turned into accused: the juiciest details of his "scandalous" private life were brought to light, and after only four days, the litigation ended with a humiliating defeat. The suit was followed with great curiosity by the press, both domestic and international.

In July of the same year, he was in court again, this time as a defendant. He was accused of having received letters that had been reported as stolen, with the purpose of using them in his lawsuit against Hamnett, even if he was found guilty and sentenced to two years' probation. In the next year (1935), unable to pay his numerous creditors, he was declared bankrupt. This can be viewed as the last "mundane" event in Crowley's life, for after this he lived in relative tranquillity. He still had a very active social life (as we will see in the coming chapters) and continued to publish important works. Among them we should remember *The Equinox of the Gods* (1936), in which he relates the events that led to the revelation of *The Book of the Law* in 1904, and *The Book of Thoth* (1944), in which he presents his personal interpretation of the Tarot.

In 1935 Karl Germer was arrested during a visit to Germany, almost certainly because of his connections with the OTO, which was now outlawed along with all other esoteric groups.⁹¹ He was tortured at the Alexanderplatz prison, then sent to the concentration camp at Esterwegen. After some time he was released and, after leaving Germany, moved to Belgium. In 1940, just before the German invasion, he was arrested

again, this time by the Belgian authorities because of his German nationality, and, after the outbreak of hostilities, was deported to France. He spent ten months in a French concentration camp, and was finally released. In 1941 he moved to the United States, and from then until Crowley's death, he held the office of Grand Treasurer of the OTO.

Aleister Crowley died of myocardial degeneration on 1 December 1947. After his death, other significant works came to light, including *Magick without Tears* (1954), composed in the last years of his life, where he presents the essential aspects of his doctrine in epistolary form; *Liber Aleph* (1961), a series of teachings directed to his disciple Charles Stansfeld Jones; and an edition of the *Confessions* (1969), including the parts that had remained unpublished until then.

Notes

Introduction

1. Scholem (1995: 2, 353, n. 3). Scholem offers similar judgements, also extending to other French and English occultists, in Scholem (1969). It seems evident that Scholem was well informed about Crowley's activities and publications even before the Second World War. On this, and more generally about Scholem's interest in occultism, see Burmistrov (2006, esp. 27–8). Interestingly, in November 1945 (thus, when Crowley was still alive) Scholem received a full report on Crowley from the biblical scholar Morton Smith, with whom he would correspond for almost forty years. Smith's information was based on the early monograph on Crowley written by P. R. Stephensen (1930). In view of Smith's long-standing interest in a "libertine" tradition with possible homoerotic connotations within early Christianity, the controversies surrounding his discovery of a secret gospel of Mark and his interpretation of Jesus as a "magician", it is interesting to note his early fascination for a figure such as Crowley. See Smith and Scholem (2008: 10–11).
2. A pioneering study in this field was written by J. Gordon Melton (Melton 1983). Fundamental contributions were subsequently made by Massimo Introvigne, who has offered useful analyses of Crowley's work and personality in the context of magically oriented new religious movements. See in particular Introvigne (1990: 268–76 and *passim*; 2010: 201–10 and *passim*). In this last text, Introvigne, although emphasizing the debt owed to Crowley by contemporary Satanism, argues against defining him as a "Satanist", which has been done too often in the past in an overly simplistic fashion. On Crowley and Satanism see also Dyrendal (2012).
3. A fundamental role in the promotion and development of this new field of study has been played by Antoine Faivre, who, until his retirement in 2002, was Chair of History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris; and by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, who has been Chair of the similarly oriented centre for the History of Hermetic Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam since this centre was created in 1999. On the history of this field, see in particular Hanegraaff (2004), and the bibliography therein. See also Faivre and Hanegraaff (1998), especially the introduction. At present, at least five valuable introductions to the history of Western esotericism are available in English, each taking a different approach to the matter (Hanegraaff 2013; Faivre 2010; Goodrick-Clarke 2008; Versluis 2007; Stuckrad 2005a). For deeper analyses of authors and currents see also the standard reference work, Hanegraaff *et al.* (2005). Scholem's approach to the adaptations of Kabbalah in non-Jewish contexts is discussed by Kilcher (1998). In this book, Kilcher brings to light the risk of essentialism inherent in Scholem's approach (see esp. *ibid.*: 23–6).
4. See for instance the French journal *Politica Hermetica*, published since 1987 and directed by Jean-Pierre Laurant. Its central focus is precisely the relationship between politics and esotericism.
5. Mosse (1964).
6. See Webb (1971, 1976). The two books are complementary: in the first, Webb covers the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth, while in the second he explores the subsequent period, up to the 1960s.
7. Webb (1976: 8).
8. *Ibid.*: 7.
9. See Laurant (1992) and Godwin (1994).
10. See Godwin (1994: 204, 315–17). The distinction has been recently used by Wouter J. Hanegraaff in his *Esotericism and the Academy* (see Hanegraaff 2012: 243–4). However, as I have argued in a review of the book, I find his application of it problematic (see Pasi 2013: 204–205).
11. Particularly Galli (1989, 1995).
12. Legends had already begun to form while he was still living. Significantly, Stephensen's apologetic book, to which I have already referred (see n. 1 above), bore the title *The Legend of Aleister Crowley*. Stephensen was not a disciple of Crowley's but one of his publishers. A later edition of the book, with an introduction by Israel Regardie, has been in print for some time since 1970. Now see the new, recent edition with an introduction by Stephen J. King and other interesting biographical material (Stephensen and Crowley 2007).

13. The departure point for my analysis has been Galli (1989), especially chapter 8: "Volo in Inghilterra" (187–214).

14. *Inferno*, V, 56.

1. An unspeakable life

1. For an initial introduction to Crowley's life and works, see my entries in two standard encyclopaedias of esoterism, one in French and one in English (Pasi 1998a, 2005a). The second is more thorough, and obviously more up to date, than the first.
2. In fact, on this last point, the question was purely theoretical, because Crowley, having declared bankruptcy in 1935, no longer owned the rights to his own writings, which had passed to the British state. Any proceeds from his writings, as is usual in such cases, would have been passed on by the state to Crowley's numerous creditors until extinction of the outstanding debts.
3. The first edition was *The Great Beast: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (Symonds 1951). The second was *The Great Beast: The Life and Magick of Aleister Crowley* (Symonds 1971); this second edition included some new chapters that had been previously published in another of Symonds's works, specifically dedicated to Crowley's magical practices: *The Magic of Aleister Crowley* (Symonds 1958). The third edition was *The King of the Shadow Realm: Aleister Crowley, His Life and Magic* (Symonds 1989). This edition also had some new chapters. The fourth and most recent edition is *The Beast 666: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (Symonds 1997). With a few exceptions, this last edition does not vary significantly from the preceding one. See also Pasi (2003: 228, n. 12). In the present book, I will mostly refer to *The King of the Shadow Realm*, which remains in my view the most complete and correct edition, and has had a much broader circulation than the following one.
4. Symonds (1989: 287).
5. See Crowley (1989). For references to Freud, see pp. 45, 59–60, 72, 157, 237, 257, 554, 593, 699. There is a reference to Jung on p. 809. This autobiography was written in the early 1920s and its narrative stops in 1923, 24 years before Crowley's death. It was planned for publication in six volumes, but only the first two were released during Crowley's lifetime, in 1929. Symonds knew it very well, because he, along with Kenneth Grant, edited and abridged it for publication in a single volume in 1969. Naturally, Symonds made extensive use of this work (among others) as a source for his biography.
6. The article "An Improvement on Psychoanalysis" can now be found in Crowley, *The Revival of Magick* (1998b: 76–81). Here, Crowley endeavours to explain the differences between Freud's and Jung's methods, demonstrating a certain familiarity with the works of both authors.
7. See what Colin Wilson wrote in his biography of Crowley (Wilson 1987: 7): "Like all the previous writers on Crowley, I owe a major debt to my friend John Symonds; there is a tendency among modern Crowley disciples to denigrate *The Great Beast* for its attitude of genial scepticism; yet it is hard to imagine how it could ever be replaced as the standard biography". On the relationship between Symonds's book and the recent flurry of Crowley biographies, see my discussion in Pasi (2003: 224–45, esp. 226–9).
8. See Regardie (1993: 5ff.). A good biographical study of Regardie still has to be written. However, useful information on his life, thought and works can be found in Suster (1990), Tereschchenko (1985) and Hyatt (1985).
9. See Regardie (1937–40). The importance of this initiatory order in the history of contemporary Western esoterism has been emphasized among others by Massimo Introvigne: "[The Golden Dawn's] magical system – above all via Israel Regardie's published documents – influenced tens of thousands of people, and its themes deeply pervaded the entire *milieu* of the new magical movement, within which the Golden Dawn acquired a fame that it would be no exaggeration to describe as legendary" (Introvigne 1990: 264). The literature on this subject is now fairly extensive and includes some authoritative works. For a brief introduction, see Gilbert (2005) and Pasi (1998c). For a comprehensive overview of the context in which the Order was born, its history, its importance and its significance, see Introvigne (1990: 257–66 and *passim*) and (with some reservations) King (1989, *passim*). The history of the Order now considered "classic" is Howe (1985). There are also interesting elements and information in Gilbert (1983, 1997b), as well as in the collection of documents (with ample introduction) edited by the same author: Gilbert (1986). Finally, Greer (1995) is an interesting, well-documented study devoted to the women of the Order, who played highly significant roles throughout its history.
10. Regardie explains his intent in the preface: "There is a time to speak and a time to remain silent. For me the time has come now to raise my voice in the interest of clarifying the record of Aleister Crowley. He was one of the greatest mystics of all time, although a very complicated and controversial person." And further on: "John Symonds, his major biographer, evinces throughout his narrative a totally contemptuous attitude toward Crowley. This hostility altogether invalidates his attempt at biography. ... Crowley had appointed him executor of his literary estate, and because of this, Symonds had a unique opportunity to set the record straight once and for all. However his personal prejudices got in the way. His writing is cynical, showing no glimmer of insight or the slightest trace of sympathy" (Regardie 1993: xxiii).
11. See Suster (1988). In his preface, he also gives his opinion of Symonds's work: "John Symonds' biography, *The*

Great Beast, written over 35 years ago ... is dated in its Victorian attitudes and marred by prejudice, hostility, fictionalized sensationalism; by its refusal to expound the essence of Crowley's thought; and even by plain inaccuracy. A fresh approach is sorely needed for the eighties and after" (*ibid.*: 7). It should be noted that Suster also wrote the entry on Crowley for the prestigious *Dictionary of National Biography*, which covers the lives of all the illustrious people of Britain. Crowley was initially not included in the edition of the dictionary published after his death, but was finally given an entry in the special supplement issued in 1993, which included persons neglected in the preceding volumes (Suster 1993). Suster, as mentioned earlier, also wrote a biography of Regardie.

12. Introvigne (1990: 257).
13. The most significant books with regard to Crowley are his early works: Grant (1972, 1973). See also Grant (1991), in which he recalls the relatively brief period during which he was Crowley's secretary. Kenneth Grant's oeuvre is however rather vast and references to Crowley are present in most of his works. For a bibliography, see Bogdan (2003).
14. The history of the OTO and its many branches, with varying claims to authenticity and succession, is extremely complex and cannot be tackled here, even in broad terms. Many questions regarding its history remain controversial, and several groups, at one moment or another, have claimed a legitimate succession. In the last twenty years the group that has emerged as the most structured and widespread is undoubtedly the one that took shape originally in America in the 1970s and has been often referred to as the "Caliphate". Today, this is the group that most persons would call "OTO" without further qualifications. It is also the group that has proved to have, through several court litigations in different countries, a legitimate claim to Crowley's own copyright. The literature on the OTO is now quite extensive, but of varying quality and often difficult to access. A sufficiently thorough introduction, offering new information on some of the more obscure aspects of this organization's history, and including a comprehensive bibliography, can be found in my entry "Ordo Templi Orientis", in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Pasi 2005b). For those wishing to delve deeper, I would refer (with the reservations mentioned below) to Koenig (1994b; republished in an extended and revised edition in 2001; and then again in a further expanded edition in three vols in 2011). See also the enormous collection of documents in Koenig (1994a, 2000). Important documents on the Order's history, including rituals and teachings reserved for sexual magic, have been published in King (1973) and in Reuss and Crowley (1999). Koenig has also set up an internet site devoted to the OTO, making his studies and the materials he has gathered over the years openly accessible (*The Ordo Templi Orientis Phenomenon*, available at www.parareligion.ch). Even if the wealth of material made available by Koenig can be quite useful, it should also be noted that his books hardly meet any acceptable scholarly standard, being marred not only by a strong anti-cult bias but also by an extremely chaotic arrangement and discussion of the material itself. The Caliphate OTO has also presented its own version of the history of the Order, with contributions by various authors and a good deal of documentation (see Hymenaeus Beta 1986). Interesting elements also in Bouchet (1998: 121–72). R. Kaczynski has published an important study on the origins of the Order, based on impressive archival research, which has brought to light little known details (Kaczynski 2012). The book is also useful for its rich set of illustrations. A very interesting work on the early years of the English branch of the Order led by Crowley, including previously unpublished information, is Gilbert (1997a). Also generally on the history of the Order, but focusing more on developments in North America is Starr (2003).
15. In particular, see Crowley's autobiography, *The Confessions* (1989) and the compilation of his magical writings *Magick* (Crowley 1973a).
16. Symonds (1989: xii).
17. See especially Grant (1991).
18. Cammell (1951), King (1987), Wilson (1987), Hutchinson (1998), Booth (2000), Sutin (2000), Kaczynski (2003, 2010) and Churton (2011). The sensationalist Mannix (1959) and the fictional Roberts (1978) offer no interesting elements for the scholar, and can therefore be set aside.
19. See Wilson (2006: ch. 7, "The Beast Himself", 457–91).
20. For example, Wilson (1987: 164–5) states that two of the formulas that express the essential principles of the Thelemic creed (on which see n. 53 below), namely "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law" and "Love is the law, love under will", are not found in *The Book of the Law*, which is clearly erroneous. See Crowley (1938: ch. I, verses 40 and 57, respectively).
21. Pasi (2003).
22. Kaczynski (2010).
23. Churton (2011: 7–8).
24. Spence (2008). Spence had previously published an article on the same subject (Spence 2000).
25. Hulin (1973). Another French biography was published two years later (Waldstein 1975). It is fictionalized, sensational and worth mentioning only for the great number of inaccuracies it contains.

26. Tegtmeier (1989).
27. Vermeer (2004). This book has also been translated into German in 2005.
28. On Anger, see especially the “unauthorized” biography by Landis (1995), and on his films, see Hutchison (2004).
29. By Hymenaeus Beta/William Breeze; e.g. see his edition of Crowley’s *Magick* (1994, 1997).
30. In my article cited above (Pasi 2003: 237), as well as in the Italian edition of the present work (Pasi 1999), I erroneously associated Starr’s name with the OTO, from which he considers himself totally independent. In 1985 Starr created the Teitan Press, a publishing house specializing in reprinting Crowley’s works, which was based in Chicago. The imprint was sold in 2006 to Weiser Antiquarian Books. Apart from various introductions to the Teitan Press books, and a number of important articles (Starr 1995, 2006) see also the already mentioned study of the history of the *Ordo Templi Orientis* in North America (Starr 2003).
31. Bouchet (1988, 1998). The doctoral thesis was defended at the Université Paris Diderot-Paris 7 in 1994. A new edition has been published in 2011 with a different title and a new foreword (Bouchet 2011). Bouchet has also published a brief introduction to Crowley, in which he has summarized the content of his preceding works (Bouchet 1999).
32. Bogdan and Starr (2012). The book includes both essays previously published elsewhere and essays written especially for the occasion.
33. A significant number of articles on Crowley have been published in peer-reviewed scholarly journals such as *Nova Religio*, *Aries*, *The Pomegranate*, *Esoterica* and others.
34. The sect was founded in 1830 by John Nelson Darby. Concerning the Darbyite movement, see Séguy (1990: 68–70) and the entry “Darby, John Nelson” in Melton (1986). Information about the movement’s history can be found in Coad (1968) and Ironside (1985).
35. See Crowley (1989: 35, 39).
36. *Ibid.*: 44.
37. Rev. 13:11–18; Rev. 17:1–6.
38. Crowley (1989: 53). Young Crowley respected and intensely admired his father. He describes this relationship in the *Confessions* as follows (*ibid.*: 49): “[Crowley’s psychology] was probably determined by his admiration for his father, the big, strong, hearty leader of men, who swayed thousands by his eloquence”. Note that in this part of his autobiography Crowley refers to himself in the third person. He does that only in the first few chapters of *The Confessions*; after the point where he describes his father’s death, he begins referring to himself in the first person. This is evidence of the great importance this event held for him, and of the turning point it represented in his life. Although Symonds does not point this out, the real problem was that after his father’s death, some relatives of Crowley’s mother, whom the boy detested, took control of the situation. To make matters worse for him, at that moment his mother began to intensify her religious devotion, which must have been already quite strong even before her husband’s death. Crowley did not mince his words, describing his mother plainly as a “bigot” (*ibid.*: 58).
39. “I … began to behave like a normal, healthy human being. The nightmare world of Christianity vanished at the dawn. … The obsession of sin fell from my shoulders into the sea of oblivion” (*ibid.*: 75).
40. *Ibid.*: 76. See Genesis 3:5.
41. *Ibid.*: 121.
42. See d’Arch Smith (1987: 29).
43. See Crowley (1989: 105).
44. Arthur Edward Waite was an occultist and one of the most famous writers on esoterism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He wrote on various subjects such as Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Kabbalah and ceremonial magic. He was a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and various other occultist groups.
45. Regardie (1993: 38). About this episode and the influence of Eckartshausen’s work on Crowley, see Faivre (1969: 617–18).
46. On Mathers, see Pasi (2005c) and the appended bibliography. The only book-length biography is Colquhoun (1975).
47. On the Golden Dawn and its history, see n. 9 above.
48. Introvigne (1990: 259). On Bennett, see Harris (1998) and Crow (2009).
49. Namely, the so-called Abramelin system of magic, based on a grimoire that Mathers had found in the Arsenal Library in Paris and had then edited and republished (Mathers 1976, originally published in 1898). Regarding this book, see its recent edition with extensive introduction and commentaries by Georg Dehn (2006). Regarding the use of this text in twentieth-century occultist circles, see the compilation of documents edited by Peter-Robert Koenig (1995). About Crowley in particular, see Pasi (2011). Regarding this particular tradition of magic, see also Roling (2002: esp. 244–9). Crowley, due to his involvement in the internal conflicts of the Golden Dawn, did not complete the series of rituals.

50. Insider authors Ruggiu and Tereshchenko (2009) have noted that the initiation ritual (which was particularly complex) is not mentioned in the minutes of the record book of the Paris Ahathoor Temple, where it is supposed to have taken place. Consequently, they argue that, if the initiation ever took place at all, it was probably performed rather informally.

51. The peak was finally reached for the first time in 1954, by an Italian expedition led by Ardito Desio.

52. Maugham later wrote a novel, *The Magician* (1908), portraying an atmosphere modelled on the circle of artists he and Crowley frequented during this Parisian period, in which the main character, the ruthless Oliver Haddo, was inspired by Crowley himself. In a new edition, almost fifty years later, Maugham added a preface recounting his relationship with Crowley (Maugham 1956). On Crowley and Maugham, see Freeman (2007).

53. Thelema, meaning “will” in ancient Greek, is essentially the keyword for Crowley’s beliefs. In his view, each great religion had a sacred word that had been pronounced in the beginning by its founder, which expressed the essence of that religion in the most immediate manner, for example “Anatta” for Buddhism and “Allah” for Islam (see Crowley 1994: 688). In this sense, he intended “Thelema” to be the keyword for the religion he founded. Those who accept the “Law” of Thelema describe themselves as “Thelemites”. The Law of this new revelation consists above all in three Thelemic principles: “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law”, “Love is the law, love under will” and “Every man and every woman is a star”. The text of *The Book of the Law* has been published in countless editions and translations. For an edition including Crowley’s most important comments on the text, see Crowley’s *The Law is for All* (1993b).

54. Concerning Crowley’s relationship to Freemasonry, see Starr (1995).

55. The peak of Kangchenjunga was finally conquered in 1955 by an English expedition led by Charles Evans.

56. The ritual ended in December 1906, after Crowley’s return to England, with some rituals practised in the company of George Cecil Jones (Crowley 1989: 530–33). About the ritual and its context, see also Pasi (2011).

57. Crowley (1989: 529). The system of the Golden Dawn included ten degrees, grouped into three Orders (plus a preliminary sub-degree). There was the Outer Order, which was the actual Golden Dawn itself; the Internal or Second Order, called the *Roseae Rubeae et Aureae Crucis*; and the Third Order, the highest and most secret. The ten degrees, and the three Orders that encompass them, had an ideal relationship to the Kabbalistic “Tree of Life”, with its ten *Sephiroth* (ten aspects or emanations of God) and twenty-two “paths” connecting them. What the citation above means, therefore, is that Crowley was now preparing himself to leave behind the highest degree of the second Order, namely that of *Adeptus Exemptus*, and attain the first degree of the third Order, that of *Magister Templi*. In order to pass from the Second Order to the Third, it was necessary to overcome a particular ordeal: the “crossing of the Abyss”. Crowley states that it took him three years to pass through this ordeal, and only in 1909 was he able to “enter” the new degree definitively.

58. According to Symonds (1989: 102), however, Fuller was also the only contestant.

59. On Neuburg, especially his relationship to Crowley, see the biography by Jean Overton Fuller (1990), (no relation to J. F. C. Fuller).

60. On Mudd, see Symonds (1989: 331–7 and *passim*) and Kaczynski (2010: 175 and *passim*).

61. The A.:A.: has sometimes been confused with the OTO. But in fact, both the histories and the goals of the two orders are very different. The differences are well summarized by Regardie (1993: 454ff.), where the contrast between the “individualist” A.:A.: and the “universal” OTO is made evident. This aspect, as we shall see later, is highly interesting; see p. 27.

62. Frank Harris, a writer of Irish origin and a friend of Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, was at the time director of *Vanity Fair*. He had at least two things in common with Crowley: a bad reputation as an exhibitionist and an eccentric (due in great part to his own autobiography, *My Life and Loves*) and the accusation of having spread pro-German, or at least anti-British, propaganda in the United States during the First World War.

63. The “Enochian system” was one of the most important components of the teachings of the Golden Dawn. According to Regardie (1993: 203), it was “the crown of the Order Work. All training systems of every kind were amalgamated and synthesised into this Enochian system”. The system was derived from a series of “angelic communications” received by the famous English mathematician and erudite John Dee (1527–1608) through his seer Edward Kelley (1555–97). On Crowley’s interpretation of the Enochian system, see Asprem (2012: esp. 85–101). Crowley explored the astral regions connected with this system (the so-called *Æthyr*s or Aires) in the course of a series of visions. The result was the extraordinary and impressive account that is “The Vision and the Voice”, first published in *The Equinox* I(5). It can also be found in *Gems from the Equinox*, edited by Israel Regardie (1986: 431–591). On the magical rituals at the basis of the “Vision and the Voice” and the related visions, see Owen (2012).

64. See n. 56 above.

65. On Reuss, see the biography by Möller and Howe (1986). See also the article in English by the same authors (Möller and Howe 1978) and Kaczynski (2012: 33–48). For Reuss’s own writings, see the two anthologies of texts edited by Peter-Robert Koenig (1993, 1997). Documents and studies on Reuss can also be found on

Koenig's internet site (www.parareligion.ch). Reuss, after a brief career as an opera singer in Germany (he was then close to Wagnerian circles), devoted himself to journalism, worked as an opera impresario and pursued various Masonic and occultist activities, of which the OTO can be considered the most successful. He often resided in London, moving primarily in socialist, anarchist and theosophical circles. He was also a member of the Socialist League of William Morris and Eleanor Marx (Karl's daughter), but was expelled in 1886 on suspicion of having passed information to the German police about German political fugitives in England. He was continually engaged in the causes of feminism and sexual freedom, publishing pamphlets and delivering lectures. In the final years of his life, he was close to the famous idealistic colony of Monte Verità, near Ascona, becoming one of this community's most prominent members. Concerning his activity as a police informant, his biographers have not found documents proving the fact definitively, but they do consider it probable that Reuss collaborated with the German secret service, both during his London period and later during the First World War. In 1936 Reuss, though already dead for over a decade, was at the centre of a series of violent attacks appearing in the German anti-Semitic journal *Der Judenkenner*, which was particularly aggressive towards other representatives of German contemporary esoteric movements as well, such as Rudolf Steiner (also deceased by that time).

66. On Crowley's *Rites of Eleusis* see Brown (1978), Van Kleeck (2003) and Tupman (2003).
67. Even his funeral ceremony resulted in a scandal. See Marlow (1992: 51).
68. On Crowley's views on, and attitudes towards, Christianity, see Pasi (1998d).
69. The Scarlet Woman is one of the two main archetypal figures of Thelema, together with the Great Beast (incarnated by Crowley himself). She is mentioned in several passages of *The Book of the Law* (I, 15; III, 14; and III, 43) and is obviously related to the feminine figure appearing in the Book of Revelation in the passage quoted above (Rev. 17:4). See also Pasi (2005a: 286).
70. See S. J. Taylor (1990: 36ff.).
71. See Crowley (1989: 745).
72. *Ibid.*: 779.
73. Symonds does not mention this aspect, which I see as essential for understanding Crowley's psychology and therefore for interpreting his ideas and behaviour. Crowley gives three different versions of his American period in his autobiography, focusing in each of them on different aspects of his American experience. The first version can be found in the text of a pamphlet he wrote in the early 1920s, entitled "The Last Straw". This text appears in chapter 76 of *The Confessions* (heavily abridged in the Symonds and Grant 1969 edition) and is mostly a defence from the accusation of being involved in German propaganda. The second version, appearing in chapters 77–80, simply describes the "external" story of the American period, i.e. his journeys, his love affairs, the works he produced and his meetings and experiences in general. These two versions are both "autobiographical" in the generally accepted sense of the term. But the third version, in chapters 81–6, deals with the "subtle" aspects of his life in the same period and relates his stages of initiation to the degree of *Magus*. Of the three versions, the third is doubtless the one that describes the events that Crowley considered as the most important for him. From his point of view, it offers the key for understanding his behaviour and experiences as told in the other two.
74. See Crowley (1989: 848ff.).
75. The March on Rome (27–30 October 1922) was organized by Mussolini in order to put pressure on the King of Italy, Victor Emmanuel III, and force him to appoint him as prime minister of a new government. After this event, Mussolini and his fascist party gradually established their dictatorial regime, which would last more than twenty years.
76. Interestingly enough, the British consul in Palermo at the time was Reginald Gambier Macbean (1859–1942), who was an important member of the Italian branch of the Theosophical Society and in 1921 had been elected Grand Master of one of the offshoots of the Egyptian Masonic Rite of Memphis (see Introvigne 1990: 168ff.; Pasi 2010: 588–9). It is hard to imagine that Macbean could ignore that Crowley was an important figure in another offshoot of the Rite of Memphis (together with the Rite of Misraim) via the Yarker–Reuss line. On the other hand, if Crowley knew about the status of Macbean, he did not say it, either in his diary or in his autobiography. On the complicated story of the Egyptian rites of Memphis and Misraim and their various offshoots, see Caillet (2003), Ventura (1991a) and Galtier (1989). It is not clear whether Macbean played any part in the episode of Crowley's expulsion from Italy a few months later.
77. On this subject, see Schüller (1997).
78. The campaign was mainly conducted through a series of "tracts" and leaflets, printed and distributed by Crowley and his followers. See Kaczynski (2010: 423–5). The Mandrake Press (Thame) has reprinted a few of these leaflets and released them in a collection without any title or further information (in the catalogue of this publishing house, it is listed as Aleister Crowley, *Pamphlets*).
79. John Symonds mentions only one visit of Crowley to Gurdjieff's Prieuré on 10 February 1924, when Gurdjieff

was absent (Symonds 1997: 291). His source is Crowley's own diary. Despite Gurdjieff's absence, Crowley had a very positive impression of Gurdjieff's community of disciples and of his teachings. Other authors mention however a second visit, during which Crowley met indeed with Gurdjieff. The main source for this episode is one of Gurdjieff's pupils, Charles Stanley Nott (1887–1978), who was a direct witness and writes about it in his memoir (Nott 1961: 122). According to Nott, Crowley was received by Gurdjieff and the two talked for some time with each other. Apart from some apparent tension between the two, nothing special seems to have happened on that occasion. Nott is not very precise in his chronology, but this seems to have happened in 1926. James Webb mentions this second visit in his comprehensive study of Gurdjieff, *The Harmonious Circle* (Webb 1980: 314–15), but he also relates another version of it. According to this version, Crowley spent a whole weekend at Gurdjieff's Prieuré and was received at first as any other guest, without hostility. But when he was about to leave, Gurdjieff, who thought his duties of hospitality absolved, treated him contemptuously, calling him "filthy" and "dirty inside" and telling him never to set foot in his house again. Unfortunately, Webb does not give any reference for this version, but it can be inferred that his anonymous source must have been someone from among Gurdjieff's circle of pupils (Webb interviewed several of them for his book). Some later biographers of both Gurdjieff and Crowley have related uncritically this second version of the story (see for instance Moore 1991: 219–20; Wilson 1987: 149). The two versions (Nott's and Webb's) are so different that it would not be illogical to think that they refer to two different episodes, which would bring the total number of visits of Crowley to Gurdjieff's Prieuré to three. However, it is also possible to think that the person who related this story to Webb may have embellished the events so that the contrast between the two spiritual teachers would appear stronger, with Gurdjieff clearly taking distance from a notorious "black magician". It should also be pointed out that a sympathetic biographer of Crowley, G. Suster (1988: 92), tells yet another version of the story: "It was Yorke who gave me an accurate account of the meeting between Crowley and another celebrated magus, G. I. Gurdjieff, for he was the only other person present. There are a number of false versions, one of which Colin Wilson repeated in his elementary introductory work, *The Occult*. According to Yorke, Crowley and Gurdjieff met in Paris for about half an hour and nothing much happened other than a display of mutual male respect: 'They sniffed around one another like dogs, y'know. Sniffed around one another like dogs,' Yorke chuckled." Even if Nott does not refer to any person accompanying Crowley during his visit, it is interesting to note that Nott's and Yorke's versions seem to be quite compatible and very probably refer to the same episode. On all these episodes and versions, see also Kaczynski (2010: 406–7), Sutin (2000: 317–18), and especially Mistlberger (2010: 386–99), who offers the most extensive discussion, with interesting comments on the possible psychological aspects of the meeting between the two "Magi". Mistlberger's book as a whole is a comparative study of Gurdjieff, Crowley and Osho, a.k.a. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (1931–90). For another in-depth comparative study of Crowley and Gurdjieff, written before but published after Mistlberger's, see Hall (2012).

80. See Starr (2003: 148–50).
81. A reconstruction of these events can be found in Flowers (1994: 15ff.). See also King (1987: 149ff.). John Symonds (1991) reconstructs this period of Crowley's life in *The Medusa's Head*, a strange novel, mixing fact and fiction.
82. One version is given in Regardie (1993: 10ff.). According to Regardie, one of the persons responsible for the expulsion was Regardie's own sister, even before he left America to join Crowley. Apparently concerned about what might become of her brother in the company of such a sinister individual, she went to the French consul in Washington to prevent him from being granted a visa. But the visa having already been issued, the consul could only promise her that an investigation would be made in Paris. This is confirmed by a letter from Regardie's sister, Sarah Regardie, from 24 August 1935 to the British Minister of the Interior (RP), in which she also explains the difficult situation (from an administrative point of view) in which her brother found himself after Crowley's expulsion from France, and asks for help in getting him a visa to return to America. These events overlapped with a lawsuit brought against Crowley in December 1928 by one of his literary agents, Carl De Vidal Hunt (b. 1869), who denounced Crowley to the police because of financial disagreements. Ultimately, it is also possible that Crowley's role as international head of the OTO, an organization of German origin, led the French authorities to suspect him of being a spy in the pay of the Germans. On these events, see also Kaczynski (2010: 431–40) and Spence (2008: 197–9).
83. About Stephensen, see Munro (1984). On Crowley and Stephensen see King (2007). Stephensen, nicknamed "Inky", was born in Australia. His relationship to Crowley would deserve further investigation, since politics played an important role in his life. He was a passionate reader of Nietzsche and Bakunin, and saw his publishing activities as part of a bitter fight against bourgeois mentality. He was involved in various radical political movements, both of the extreme left (he was a member of the Communist Party during his studies at Oxford in the mid-1920s) and, later in his life, of the extreme right. As was the case with several of Crowley's acquaintances, he paid a high price for his political activities. During the Second World War he was imprisoned for his pro-Nazi activities in Australia, where he had returned to a few years previously. Doubtless he saw Crowley as a

kindred spirit, who shared at least his strong anti-bourgeois sentiments with him; this can explain the sympathy he showed toward Crowley, and the decision to publish his works.

84. Stephensen (1930). Given Stephensen's long-standing interest for politics and activism, it is not surprising that he devotes special attention to the political aspects of Crowley's work in his book.

85. On Crowley and painting, see Pasi (2008) and Hymenaeus Beta (1998).

86. Crowley and Huxley were introduced by a mutual friend, the mathematician John W. N. Sullivan (1886–1937), with whom Huxley was briefly living in Berlin during this period. According to Symonds (1989: 458), Crowley included a portrait of Huxley in the exhibition of his paintings that he held in Berlin shortly after his Portuguese escapade. Symonds also gives this quote from Crowley without indicating the source: "I thought he had a lot of money and painted him like this to flatter him." It is likely that the relationship between Crowley and Huxley was more interesting than how Symonds describes it. In Crowley's diary from 1930, a typewritten copy of which exists in the Yorke Collection (YC, mss. I, H5), there are some references to the meetings Crowley had with Huxley in the month of October. It is also interesting to see what J. Webb has to say about their relationship: "There is firsthand evidence that Crowley introduced Aldous Huxley to mescaline in pre-1933 Berlin" (Webb 1976: 439). Regarding this piece of information, Webb states that "The source is a former disciple of Crowley" (*ibid.*; in all probability, the source is Gerald Yorke). Webb continues: "This is interesting and significant for it indicates that Huxley's wide reading in mystical matters was supplemented by practical experience before he arrived in the United States in 1937" (*ibid.*). He then adds, in a footnote: "As his correspondence shows, Huxley kept in touch with almost every prominent member of the mystical underground. At first there were Gerald Heard and Christopher Isherwood, later Alan Watts and Timothy Leary" (*ibid.*: 482, n. 40). As we have seen, Crowley also associated with Isherwood during his time in Berlin. Finally, the Yorke Collection includes a letter dated 9 December 1932, and two postcards, undated but with postmarks from 1 March and 14 July 1933 (YC/OS, E21), sent by Huxley to Crowley. See also "Aldous Leonard Huxley" in Cornelius and Cornelius (1996: 73–5) and Kaczynski (2010: 448–9).

87. On him and his relationship with Crowley, see pp. 83–8.

88. It is interesting to note that one of Crowley's biographers, Gerald Suster, has claimed that this was not the case. He wrote: "Crowley kept moving during the years 1936–9. He paid a number of visits to Nazi Germany. There ... was a successful exhibition of his paintings in Berlin, where he encountered Aldous Huxley" (Suster 1988: 73). It would be remarkable to prove that Crowley went to Germany in those years, but if there is one thing on which all other biographers agree (and which is confirmed by the available evidence), is that he never left England again after 1932. The events to which Suster refers did indeed occur in Germany, but this was (as I have just pointed out) in 1931. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine Crowley holding an exhibition of his paintings in Berlin during a later period, if one considers the limited sort of artistic production that was tolerated in Germany during the Nazi regime. Suster himself appears to have reconsidered his statement, if – as it seems evident – it is he to whom Ralph Tegtmeyer is referring in the following passage: "statements in the literature [on Crowley's life] are often very imprecise, and sometimes even contradictory. In one instance (Crowley's travels in the Third Reich), they are given by only one of his biographers, who later, in a personal conversation, expressed doubt about his own account" (Tegtmeyer 1989: 35).

89. Cammell (1951: 7–8).

90. Hamnett (1932).

91. Crowley was obviously aware of the situation of his initiatory organizations in Germany. Although Germany had been one of the countries in which the Crowleyan movement was most lively and active, not much of it remained after the Nazi persecution.

2. Magical politics

- Indeed, he often described himself, using a favourite expression of his beloved Shelley, as a "Wanderer of the Waste". See for example Crowley (1989: 228, 334, 415).
- In a footnote of his classic study, *The Romantic Agony*, Mario Praz lists Crowley among the English decadents who were inspired by "satanic currents". See Praz (1970: 413).
- The historian Frank M. Turner has suggested that for the nineteenth-century English context "scientific naturalism" is a better term than positivism, which was more specifically French and mostly inspired by Auguste Comte's (1798–1857) ideas. See Turner (1974: 11). What is referred to by the term is the scientific, agnostic and secular current of thought that was particularly influential in England (but also, in different forms, in other European countries) during the second half of the nineteenth century.
- Just to give an example: "The result of any election, or for the matter of that any revolution, is an almost wholly insignificant component of those stupendous and inscrutable Magical Forces which determine the destinies of the planet" (Crowley 1973b: 463). For an explicit reference to the subordination of the material plane to the spiritual, see also *The Confessions* (Crowley 1989: 124–5). This is also how we should view Crowley's idea that